



**TALK BY CHARLOTTA MARTINUS
HOUSE OF COMMONS
YOGA IN SOCIETY ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP
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Thank you for asking me to speak.

I have worked with young people for 30 years, as a yoga therapist in Youth Justice, Pupil Referral Units, Schools, Youth work, with care leavers, young carers, in psychiatric hospital settings and **training professionals** within all these settings.

I know that all of us here are **all profoundly concerned** by the challenges facing young people in our country ..and in our communities especially **post-Covid**. According to the latest figures from Young Minds, 1 in 4 young people between 14 and 18 are facing some kind of mental health problem, 7% of children under 17 have attempted **suicide** and 1 in 4 say they have **self-harmed**. The 40% rise in CAMHS referrals in May this year is the **highest** we have ever seen and the 60% being refused CAMHS care is equally horrific,(according to the Medecare healthcare Report (2022).)

Many of us here today feel yoga is an excellent **antidote** to *these and many other* prevalent issues and **we'd like to explain why**.

These days, with at least 3 million Britons having tried yoga (according to Newsmans report of 2019), (According to a 2016 Forbes report) and **37% of them under 18**, we are seeing its widespread **acceptance** and the **contribution it makes to our wellbeing**. Dear Members of Parliament, I think you'll find **most of your constituents** will know and appreciate yoga and you can be pretty sure of finding a **good** number of places in your constituency where it is practised regularly.

What about young people I hear you ask?

I can attest to the use in Psychiatric contexts, as **Psychiatrist** and trustee of our charity Dr Barker from Southampton says: *Yoga can help with **prevention of mental illness** and give tools to help Young People cope when they do suffer, plus community of groups to help reduce **isolation**. There is good evidence to show **body acceptance** improves with yoga in adults and this is key preventive strategy in Eating Disorders (**which have had biggest rise since Covid and increase in inpatient admissions**) there is not enough staff in CAMHS----- trained teen yoga practitioners may help as a **primary care** intervention to reduce referrals... and in **secondary care** on waiting lists.*

But I guess your question is **why?** What is it about yoga that is **so convincing** as to make us set up an APPG?

Maybe we could start with the things we see happening in yoga classes.

In 2020 Rachel Holborrow, Senior Leader at Foxwood Academy, a SEN school for 11-18 year olds in Nottingham introduced **10 minutes of postures, breathing and relaxation every lunchtime for a term** to the entire school. Yoga. Behavioural incidences compared to the previous year **halved**.

For many teachers, behavioural issues are the **main obstacle** to learning especially in SEN contexts, as my colleague Jo Manuel will explain in a minute. What was interesting in Nottingham was that **over time the incidents dropped** not just AFTER the yoga, but in the **following mornings** too. The yoga was changing the atmosphere in the school.

Working in the PRU in Odd Down in North Somerset every week, as I do, I notice the **strong impact** yoga has on the students every day, making it easier for the entire school to teach and learn. One example is Ryan, a seriously “difficult” 9 year old, who after a few sessions of yoga, the staff notice has become calmer, more centred.

This kind of experience is unusual in a school context, it is a change based on **self acceptance, emotional release and regulation**. We are introducing pupils at an early age to their own inherent **calm**, which eventually they will learn to access by themselves ...for the rest of their lives.... despite unimaginable home circumstances.

Let’s delve a little deeper to understand **exactly what is happening when we do yoga...**

The BBC TV researched this in 2017. They took cortisol samples from students’ saliva before and after yoga. Cortisol is the main marker for stress-and-anxiety in the body. Levels **dropped by half – after yoga**. Not only that, but the researcher remarked at how the **cortisol started at half the level** of the other two groups before the students had even **begun** the session. **The effect of the habit of yoga**.

When cortisol levels drop, we see a significant change in behaviour, focus and concentration. **Students become quiet, calm, pro-social and learn quicker and more effectively** as we come into the relaxation response rather than the fight or flight.

On Friday I taught a day of yoga to 140 Year 12s. I asked each group what they **needed**. I wasn’t surprised to hear that most groups felt **overwhelmed and anxious**. Challenging balances and partner work, followed by stretching, certain breathing techniques and therapeutic listening, brought the results I had hoped to achieve. *“Wow! I feel zen!” “Not gonna lie Miss, that was sick!” “I need this in my life, Miss, can we do it like every day?”*

The teachers watching on Friday remarked how surprised they were that the boys who normally “play up”, changed completely. Their experience of yoga **has given them a space to let go of the tension they carried and find peace** which brought about a shift in mood and behaviour, welcomed by the whole group. They are now planning a whole school intervention based on this.. one.. day.

In fact, research we did with Leeds University back in 2013 found that:
100% felt that their emotional state had changed for the better
80% felt a sense of personal achievement
70% a rise in social cohesion
90% felt it improved their sports performance

The boys tumbled in, years 7 and 8. They bounced onto their mats, all eyes on me. *What's up boys?* The litany starts. I pause then ask them, *how often do people ask you how you are?* They pause *never*, **I have found this in every youth context I deliver**. We continue, strong postures are needed today, to focus them, to release the frustration and sometimes anger. Aidan is not as engaged in the postures as he usually is, I go and ask him what happened and he tells me that his guinea pig died. We take a break from the postures and do some breathing instead, to calm ourselves, We come into relaxation. The silence in the room at the end tells me all I need to know.

That was a small study. In 2018 the charity received a substantial fund from the EU to run a 2 year study across 5 countries with very different contexts. Our idea was that if it **works** in **all these places** then it probably works **all over**. We worked with **750** students and staff. The outcomes showed significant change in wellbeing overall for everyone, lower perceived stress levels, and increased quality and quantity of sleep.

The cohort in the UK was based at a disadvantaged maintained school in rural Somerset. Mr Chantry, the deputy head said that year 11s had in year 10 had **14 CAMHS referrals and that this had dropped to 0** referrals in the same year group in the following year. **His** view was that this drop was due toyoga.

What does this mean in monetary terms?

How much does it cost when a student is referred to CAMHS? How much do we save, by keeping our young people safe from harm and instead **thriving**?

We know that 1 hour with a CAMHS psychiatrist costs today £1260 and 10 weeks of yoga at an hour a week costs £70 per student. There are many other cost-based indicators we could explore, without looking at the intangibles, **the class hours lost** because of behavioural issues, the **SEN support**, the cost in terms of **morale and bullying** in the school when these needs are not being met?

BUt I'd rather look at the positives. When a school has **robust** wellbeing measures in place that change the mood and the morale of the school, how **far** do these ripples reach? Students have told me of sharing a particular *breathing technique* with mum or dad at home. **Kwesia** will speak of effects in inclusion in a minute.

But the effects are not just for the individual students, they benefit schools and education. Mr Parry, deputy head at Birkenhead School on the Wirral has implemented yoga across the school. Here are his words:

We introduced yoga at School in 2018 to **improve wellness**. Our main aim was to give **every student** yoga by the end of Year 8. We also offer staff yoga. 2 of our Senior teens undertook the Teen Yoga **Ambassador training**. They ran a lunchtime club this year and have also helped in Year 4. Yoga has been **fully integrated** into our school and the wider school community, benefitting **mental health, physical conditioning and also as a sense of building a stronger support network** for the students. Exam stress is a huge talking point at the moment due to Covid. Yoga has helped many students **control their anxiety, relax in stressful exam situations and hopefully, achieve their full potential as a result**. These are **life skills that provide our students with a first aid kit for life**.

So you see, we need to start to **join up our** thinking around healthcare and education. We need to **prevent mental health** from worsening and **empower young people** to support each other, through their own *lived experience* of **changing their own mental health**, as in our peer to peer schemes, heralded by Public Health England, College of Medicine, Duke of Edinburgh award, Ofsted and many consultants in education. **Shivani** will speak about this in a minute.

Our patron and yogi Sir Anthony Seldon:

Yoga gives us tools to **thrive** in a difficult world. Practitioners learn how to come to peace, to recognise and to **regulate emotions** by using our breath, movement and relaxation. It helps **co-regulate others**, and create a harmonious atmosphere, in which all can **thrive and focus**. These elements lie at the **basis of well-being**, leading to **success** in education and **in life**. I believe that bringing yoga more into education would be an effective way to **reverse** current trends of mental health and build a **solid future** for our younger generations.

CONCLUSION

Yoga is **cheap** and **effective**. It is **scientific, systematic, and above all responsive**. It creates a greater emotional intelligence and resilience and consequently also greater **self-regulation**. We need the government to recognise it and support it, allowing healthcare and education to overlap, helping to **relieve** both CAMHS and the teaching community of the current **crushing mental health burden**.

Applied correctly, yoga adapts to the needs of each young person, and each group. Yoga gives them the **tools** to become **masters of their own wellbeing and hence their future**. As education should. As societies should.

Given the School's Bill is currently under review and mental health improvement is so important, I suggest that you might like to join the working group to craft an amendment for yoga to be included in all schools.

